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INTERESTING BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.

Memoranda read by Geo. W. Harris, at a meeting of the Hope Fire Company of Harrisburg, of which he was an early member.

U. S. A.

GEN. MICHAEL SIMPSON.

In this centennial year of our national independence, it is proper to bring to notice some of those who were actively and effectively engaged in its achievement, and whose names have nearly faded from the recollection of the public of the present day. It affords me pleasure to bring to public notice one who in my early years I knew personally, and of whose kind and genial manners I have pleasurable recollection. This is General Michael Simpson. He was a native of this county, his father; Thomas Simpson, owned 380 acres of land, a part of which is now within the limits of the upper part of Harrisburg. The patent to Thomas Simpson is dated the 21st of February, 1760, and this land adjoined that afterwards the property of William Maclay, on a part of which the state capitol is built. The land of Thomas Simpson was originally a part of about 1,200 acres surveyed in 1732 for proprietaries. It fronted on the Susquehanna, and was afterward, in 1759, resurveyed; and in 1760 was patented in three parts, of about the same quantity, to three persons, whose christian name was Thomas. The upper part, of about 380 acres and allowance, was conveyed to Thomas M'Kee; the piece next below, of about 380 acres and allowance, was conveyed to Thomas Forster, and the lower piece, also of about 380 acres and allowance, was patented to Thomas Simpson.

Next below the land of Thomas Simpson lay a tract of about three hundred acres of John Harris, a part of which, viz, about one hundred and eighty acres, afterward belonged to William Maclay, as above stated; and next below was the five hundred acres of John Harris, on which Harrisburg was laid out, the title to which, William Maclay states, was obtained long after settlement; the title to both tracts of John Harris being dated 1733. Upon the death of his father, Michael, the subject of this sketch, sold his interest in this land of his father; and, I have been told, received in payment for it continental money, which became nearly worthless.

He was a revolutionary soldier. In the latter part of his life, and for a number of years previous to his death, he resided on a farm on the Susquehanna in York county, about three miles below the Harrisburg bridge. This valuable farm consisted of several hundred acres, and originally belonged to the first John Harris, from whom it was transmitted down till it came, through his marriage with the widow Chesney, to whom it then belonged, to the ownership of General Simpson. He was a friend of the father of the writer of this article, and when quite young, perhaps ten or twelve years of age, I, with one of my brothers, frequently visited him, crossing the river in our log

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canoe (a kind of boat then much used here) and returning in the afternoon of the next day. He occupied a large stone house on the river bank, and lived plentifully. He always received us with hearty good will, and when we were seated at the table he seemed to enjoy our healthy appetite and would urge us to indulge it. He had no children, and seemed to like young company. He had a number of colored servants, and they added to our pleasure in roaming about the farm or listening to their stories of hunting and other matters in which they were interested.

The general was a good deal eccentric. His parlor and entry were hung about with deer horns, guns, an alligator, a large number of Indian and other curiosities. After his death these were sold, and I have been told that a considerable part of them came into the hands of Landis, of Lancaster, and formed a part of his exhibition in that city, where music on a hand organ, then somewhat of a rarity about here, was ground out by the hour, perhaps to the profit of Landis, but, I am inclined to think, to the annoyance of the immediate neighborhood.

A sister of General Simpson became the wife of Parson Elder, of the Paxton church.

The general left his splendid farm to his nephew, Michael T. Simpson, who was called after him; and it afterward came by purchase to the ownership of Mr. Jacob M. Haldeman.

General Simpson had on each side of the lane leading toward the rear of his farm a row of cherry trees of perhaps a third of a mile or more in length. Some of them, which he reserved for the use of his family or friends, had a whisp of straw occasionally extended around them. A man living in Harrisburg was once asked, as I understood, to assist the general with his grass or grain harvest, but failed to come. But afterwards, as was customary with many others, he came to get cherries; and, without leave, he got upon one of the reserved trees. This was told to the general, who in excitement called out to one of his servants, "Rome, Rome, get an axe." His man Rome got an axe, and the general got a long stick and directing Rome to cut down the tree; stood beneath it, and kept the man from jumping down till the tree was felled.

The general entered the revolutionary army in 1775, as a second lieutenant; his commission being dated the 25th of June, 1775; and he served in the company of Captain Matthew Smith and was attached to the Quebec expedition. The regiment was commanded by Colonel William Thompson, of Cumberland county, in this state. Lieutenant Simpson is mentioned by Judge Henry in his narrative of that campaign. Judge Henry was the first president judge of the common pleas of Dauphin county, being commissioned on the 16th of December, 1793. One of the companies in that expedition was that of Captain William Hendricks, from Cumberland county, Pennsylvania, and another from Lancaster county was commanded, as before mentioned, by Captain Matthew Smith. Henry, then a lad of about seventeen or eighteen years of age, was a private in the company of Captain Smith. Others of the troops were from Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut, and perhaps some from New Hampshire. Captain Daniel Morgan, afterward of revolutionary fame, was along with riflemen from Virginia. The entire force amounted to about 1,100 men and was under the command of General Arnold. It was intended to co-operate with the army of General Montgomery, which had entered Canada by the way of Champlain and Montreal. The force under Arnold was to advance by the Kennebec and Chaudiere.

Judge Henry, in his narrative, speaks kindly of Lieutenant Simpson. He says that on one occasion, after a fatiguing march, they stopped on the side of a river swollen with rain, and running with a rapid current and about 150 or 200 yards in breadth. But the provisions, tents and camp equipage were on the opposite side of the stream. "We supposed that the most adventurous boatman would not dare the passage across to us. But we were mistaken; there were two men, and only two, who had skill and courage to dare it; need Lieutenant Simpson, on an occasion like this, be named. He, accompanied by John Tidd, entered his empty boat. What skill in boatmanship? What aptitude with the paddle was here exhibited. * * * Simpson 'displayed his amazing skill.' There was an eddy in the stream, but even that was frightful. He came near being pitched into the stream. The stream forced his boat down the river, but he recovered and brought it up. Now we ~~also were~~ trembling for the fate of our friends, and anxious for our own accommodation, began to fear that he might be drawn under the pitch. Quick, almost in a moment, Simpson was with us. He called, in his loud voice, to Robert Dixon, James Old, a messmate, and myself, to enter the boat. We entered immediately. He pushed off, attempting the start by favor of the eddy, which was the main thing. He failed.

"Returning to the shore we were assailed by a numerous band of soldiers, hungry and anxious to be with their companions. Simpson told them that he could not carry more with safety, and would return for them. But several jumped into the boat. Simpson's countenance changed, and he said, 'O God, men, we shall all die.' They would not recede. Nearing the opposite shore some of the men leaped to the

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shore and thus forced the boat into the stream. The boat was carried under by the violence of the current. I called out, "Simpson, we are going to heaven!" My fall was head foremost. Simpson came after me. His heels, at the depth of fifteen feet or more, were upon my head and neck, and these grinding on the gravel. We were nearly together—I first, my friend followed. The art of swimming, in which I thought myself an adept, was tried, but it was a topsy-turvy business; the force of the water threw me often heels-over-head. After a few hundred yards, Simpson was at my side; but the force of the stream prevented the exertion of swimming, yet its impetuosity kept us up. It drove us towards the other side of the river, against a long ridge of perpendicular rock of great extent. As we floated along an Irishman, an excellent soldier, Edward Cavanaugh, passing along, happened to come to the river at the instant that my breast had struck a tree. He cried out, 'Johnny, is this you,' and he dragged me out of the water. Simpson immediately appearing, he did him the same good office. Dixon not being able to swim, it was supposed' had been drowned; but he had stuck to the side of the boat and was lodged in a pile of drift wood and was saved. We arrived at the camp. Simpson was so much exhilarated by our escape that, seated on a stump, he sang 'Plato' in great glee. It became a great favorite with us. I lost my knapsack, my hat and my most precious rifle."

In a subsequent part of the narrative of Judge Henry, Simpson is again mentioned: "When the party, hungry and dejected, were sitting about a fire, Simpson, to animate the company, would sing 'Plato.' His sonorous voice gave spirit to my heart, and the morality of the song, consolation to my mind. In truth the music, though not so correct as that of Handel, added strength and vigor to our nerves."

On the next day, November 3, Henry observes, that here, for the first time, "Aaron Burr, a most amiable youth of twenty, came to my view—he was then a cadet. It will require most cogent evidence to convince my mind, that he ever intended any ill to his country, of late years, by his various speculations. Though differing in political opinion from him, no reason has yet been laid before me to induce a belief that he was traitorous to his country; however, take this as the wayward ideas of a person totally excluded from a knowledge of the secrets of the cabinet, who was somewhat attentive to its operations so far as newspaper information can elucidate." Subsequently, Henry speaks well of Simpson, when Dixon was struck in the leg by a cannon ball that was fired near to Quebec, from which wound he died. He speaks in favorable terms of Dixon and observes that he was a gentleman, and owned property in West Hanover township, then in Lancaster county, now in Dauphin; and he remarks that the blood of Dixon was the first oblation upon the altar of Liberty at Quebec.

Henry was taken prisoner in the attack upon Quebec, which took place upon the first day of January, 1776. Simpson was then away, under an order of Gen. Arnold on the 29th of December, 1775, and was, therefore, not engaged on the attack upon the city.

Upon the termination of the attack upon Quebec, Simpson returned with the balance of the army. The regiment of Col. Thompson had been engaged for the term of one year, which expired on the 1st of July, 1776. Portions of the regiment re-enlisted, and Col. Thompson, having been appointed brigadier general, the regiment came under the command of Col. Hand, of Lancaster county. Captain Smith being absent on recruiting service and First Lieut. Steel having been taken prisoner at Quebec, the company was probably under the command of Lieut. Simpson in the battle of Long Island.

This regiment was the first regiment of the Pennsylvania line.

Simpson was afterward appointed captain on the first of December, 1776. The regiment was engaged in the battle of Trenton of the 26th of December, 1776; in that of Princeton on the 3d of January, 1777; in that of Brandywine on the 11th of Sept., 1777, and in the battle of White Plains on the 24th of October, 1776.

In January, 1779, he addressed a letter to the supreme executive council containing a request for clothing, which request, it appears, was not granted. The letter, written in a fair, manly hand, was as follows:

To the Honorable the Supreme Executive Council of the State of Pennsylvania—GENTLEMEN: When Captain Lang arrived at camp I had obtained a furlough to go home, after a fatiguing campaign, in particular from the 12th of August until the army was ordered to march from Fredericksburg. I was in the infantry on the enemy's line with Colonel Gest, under the command of General Scott, when, in September last, a detachment with Colonel Gest was surrounded by the enemy and twenty-seven privates and two officers made prisoners; they took my clothing, great coat and boots. Not being able to get a supply of clothing from Captain Lang I do humbly request your honors to allow me a supply out of the state store, viz:

Cloth for great coat.
1 pair of boots.
4 shirts and 4 pair of hose.
1 pair shoes and 1 pair buck'n breeches.

MICHAEL SIMPSON.
Capt 1st Penna. Reg't.

PHILADELPHIA, 12 Jan., 1779.

[Endorsed]

Capt. Simpson, Jan'y 12, 1779. Petition dismissed as being contrary to a rule laid down by the council not to deliver clothing to any officer whose regiment was at camp in any case except a prisoner and wounded.

The soldiers of the Pennsylvania line were enlisted for three years or during the war. About the 1st of January, 1781, happened the revolt of the Pennsylvania line. The soldiers claimed their discharge, contending that though the war was not terminated, they were entitled to discharge at the termination of three years of service. This question arose during the late war and was decided in favor of the soldiers. The regiments were eventually consolidated into six regiments, and there being supernumerary officers, Simpson retired from the service. This was on or about the 1st of January, 1781. He had also served in General Sullivan's campaign against the northern Indians in 1779. Soon after he left the army he got married.

A brother of Michael Simpson, William Simpson, was at Boston during its investment. I have heard that seeing a cannon ball from a British gun rolling over the plain, and not sufficiently estimating its force, he put out his foot to arrest it, but it broke his leg. This happened on the 27th of August, 1775, and the wound resulted in his death.

As to the personal appearance of General Simpson my own impression is that he was a large, powerful man near to six feet in height; and a highly respectable aged lady now residing in Harrisburg, confirms this statement, and added that "he looked like a general."

He had a remarkably loud, clear voice, and I have it from credible authority—from one who had frequently percieved it and who is now residing in Harrisburg, that he could be heard across the Susquehanna in calling to his servants about the farm, or to the boatmen on the opposite side of the river, the river being there three quarters of a mile or more in width. The general owned the ferry on the York county side of the river, and for awhile leased the Chambers ferry on the opposite or east side of the river. The water at that ferry, at low water, was rather deeper than at the ferry at Harrisburg.

I have been informed that when General Washington was in this neighborhood during the disturbances in western Pennsylvania, he paid a visit to General Simpson at his farm. Washington was at Harrisburg in 1794 and went as far west as Bedford, where he was on the 19th of October. From this he turned toward the east, leaving the army to proceed westward under the command of General Hamilton. Washington reached Philadelphia on the 28th of October, where congress was about to assemble in the month of November. If he visited General Simpson it was probably on his return from Bedford.

The song about Plato, I have been informed, was often sung by the general. So far I have not been able to trace it, or a part of it might have been attached to this.

The general was married a second time. His second wife was a widow lady of Bedford, in this state, a remarkably fine looking English woman. I understand that he was then about seventy years of age, and his groomsman was twenty-five.

The general is buried in the grave yard of the Paxton church. I understand that he had the iron railing which is now there, prepared for or placed around the ground which he destined for his own burial place. This railing, I think, was the first one erected in the Paxton grave yard, and perhaps was the first one erected in any grave yard in this neighborhood. It was not then customary here to *fence* around the dead, or to build splendid trophies in their honor, or to do more than put over or near to their resting place some inexpensive memorial, sometimes—

"With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture decked,"

but, generally, with mention of their name and years, and sometimes days; their virtues often briefly proclaimed; but their faults or frailties unacknowledged.

General Simpson was possessed of amiable qualities. He was a warm friend, kind, liberal and obliging, and by his neighbors was liked and respected.

He died on June 1, 1813, age 73. I have heard that when he died the clock in his house stopped. As to this

I do not say "now the truth may be,
I say the tale as 'twas said to me."

Whilst we are engaged in commemorating the events of our revolutionary struggle and rescuing from oblivion or bringing to public notice the names and services of those known to us who risked their lives and fortunes in a cause, by many considered doubtful in result for a considerable time after the conflict began, let us not forget that there were many others who died in the hospital, the prison ship, or the battle field, whose names and particular services have been forgotten. As to these let us say what some of them might have thought:

"Needs there the praise of the love written record,
The name and the epitaph graved on the stone;
The things that we lived for, let them be our story,
We ourselves remembered only *by what we have done.*"

JULY, 1876. GEO. W. HARRIS.

PLATO.

The following, discovered in "The Southern and Western Songster," is the song sung by Lieutenant Simpson. In sentiment it resembles the poem repeated, from memory, by President Lincoln, and which was written by William Knox, of Scotland.

"SAYS PLATO, WHY SHOULD MAN BE VAIN?"

Says Plato, why should man be vain,
Since bounteous Heaven hath made him great;
Why look with insolent disdain
On those undecked with wealth or state?
Can splendid robes, or beds of down,
Or costly gems that deck the fair;
Can all the glories of a crown
Give health, or ease the brow of care?

The sceptred king, the burthened slave,
The humble and the haughty die;
The rich, the poor, the base, the brave
In dust without distinction lie.
Go search the tombs where monarchs rest,
Who once the greatest titles bore;
The wealth and glory they possessed
And all their honors are no more.

So glides the meteor through the sky,
And spreads along a gilded train;
But when its short-lived beauties die,
Dissolves to common air again.
So 'tis with us, my jovial souls,
Let *friendship* reign while here we stay;
Let's crown our joys with flowing bowls,
When Jove us calls we must obey.